

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE BRIEFER: CAPTAIN PAUL ABRAHAM, UK ROYAL NAVY, DIRECTOR OF MARITIME STRATEGIC TRANSITION TEAM AND SENIOR ADVISOR TO THE IRAQI NAVY SUBJECT: BUILDING AND DEVELOPING THE IRAQI NAVY MODERATOR: CHARLES "JACK" HOLT, CHIEF, NEW MEDIA OPERATIONS, OFFICE OF THE ASSISTANT SECRETARY OF DEFENSE PUBLIC AFFAIRS TIME: 11:00 A.M. EDT DATE: TUESDAY, JULY 22, 2008

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MR. HOLT: With us today is, for the DOD live Bloggers Roundtable, is Captain Paul Abraham, who is the director -- who's from the United Kingdom, the United Kingdom Royal Navy. He is the director of maritime strategic transition team, and also the senior adviser to the Iraqi navy.

Sir, good morning our time, and good evening your time. Thanks for joining us today.

CAPT. ABRAHAM: Yeah, good morning, Jack. Thanks very much, and thank you for that introduction. I'll just explain for about six minutes or so the job I do and how it relates to training up the Iraqi navy, and give a little bit of background to where we are with the navy, and then I'll open it for questions, if you are happy with that.

MR. HOLT: That will work, sir.

CAPT. ABRAHAM: Great. Well, as the director of the maritime strategic transition team, I do that sort of policy end of everything in Baghdad, so all the boring paperwork bit. But the interesting part of the job is working alongside the head of Iraqi navy, and that sort of naval staff, the Iraqi naval staff up here in Baghdad, and helping them prepare as they grow very quickly to what will be a capable navy in a few years time.

Now down in Umm Qasr, the naval base, there is another RN captain down there, and he's got a combined U.S. and U.K. team who are actually doing the training and doing all the interesting bits and working with these Iraqis as they develop their -- develop their navy.

Now what I'm going to do now is just go around now what we've got at the moment, and what's going to happen between now and the end of 2010. Now to start with, to put it into context, the navy was -- or the new navy was started in November of 2004. That's when they decided they would go from a coast guard force and rebuild the navy.

Real work didn't start until 2005, so we're three years into this process of rebuilding from ground zero the Iraqi navy. Now we started by taking a lot of old Iraqi navy personnel back into the navy and retraining those, and that's been the basis. And now we're starting to take in new people.

Now currently, they've got 15 vessels; there's five Chinese predator patrol boats, then 10 small riverine crafts which they use for boarding ships and also for riverine patrols. But between the middle of 2009 and 2010 they are going to take 47 new vessels, 21 of those are above 34 meters in length, and they will consist of 15 patrol boats, four patrol ships, and two offshore support vessels.

So that's quite a challenge to take those many ships in that short period of time, but we are confident that they will be able to do that and be in a good standard in order to take over. I'll discuss that a little bit more in the future, in a minute.

In addition to that sort of naval force, the dark blue force, they've all got -- they've also got two battalions of Marines. Now they were planned to have one battalion, at about two-thirds strength at the moment, and that was to do the protection of the oil platforms, and also to do boarding work. But in the end of March when their prime minister decided to take the militia on and very successfully defeat them in Basra, and the Iraqi navy were given 500 soldiers, told to turn them into a new battalion of marines, and to seize the forts of Umm Qasr and Azerbaijan. And those are the two key ports in Iraq. And Umm Qasr has 90 percent of the imports and exports of the entire country, and was under militia control. They very successfully conducted that action, and now the navy holds those ports, and does the perimeter security of those ports while the ports are being arranged for reinvestment, et cetera.

So those are the two marine battalions. They're not up to full strength, and we've got a lot to do to get them up to where they need to be. But they're already conducting operational roles.

And to give you some of the sort of things that the whole navy is doing, they currently conduct 42 patrols per week. That's 300 percent increase in 12 months of what they're doing. They have the point defense of one of their oil platforms already, and they contribute 25 percent of the seagoing forces, which are in the perimeter defense. Those are the launches that are off the oil platforms on a day-to-day basis.

They control their core Al Abdullah, the major waterway. They do all the patrol in there; it's not done by the coalition anymore. It's entirely theirs. And they also the vessel board-seize-and-search operations on their own independently, but as part of the whole coalition effort. So that's pretty impressive.

And in crude terms, they are -- they've got security for about 20 percent of their gross domestic product at the moment, and that will build over the next two years until they have responsibility for the defense of all of that, and they already have responsibility for defending 90 percent of the imports and exports because they control these ports.

We -- sorry, we aim to achieve the counterinsurgency navy fully complete and fully trained up by the end of 2010, stroke early 2011, and we're on track to achieve that with the vessels that have been contracted and the training that we're doing.

Just onto a few initiatives to tell you the sort of things that are happening, not necessarily inside Iraq, but outside of Iraq. There are -- 17 of

their officers are in the United Kingdom at the moment, which are conducting training, that's command, warfare, navigation and basic officer training.

Last year, one of their young officers who went to Britannia Royal Naval College in Dartmouth, which is the United Kingdom's equivalent of Annapolis, was the senior international student from the passing out. So they're very committed and they're good quality people.

We're developing their diving capability, their diving team. We're using UK warships in theater to increase their officer watch and their watch-keeping ability. We're going to add additional marines, probably Royal marines and U.S. Marines, to develop the quality of these two battalions of marines, and bring them up to the standard we need. And we're giving things like additional English language training to a lot of their people, because English is the maritime language, as it were, so we just need to build that up.

And we're building new piers and seawalls for them, or rather, it's their money but we're just assisting them in the contracting for that. They're building a combination down there, but we've still got some challenges in some of the infrastructure to get it absolutely where we want to be, and that's warehousing and workshops, et cetera.

As I said, of these 21 new ships, or the large ships, we've got 12 left to contract, six will hope to be done in October, six in April of next year, and then that's all those 21 ships on contract in accordance with our plan. And the other 26 small ships are starting to be delivered in August, so that will go.

As I said, the 21 new ships over the year between the middle of 2009 and 2010 is quite a challenge. No other nation would take 21 warships of three different classes and introduce them into the fleet in 12 months. We have this plan to do this with the Iraqis; it is achievable, but it is going to be a challenge. And sometimes it's difficult to persuade the Iraqi Ministry of Defense how important it is to build up their navy with all the other challenges that they've got. But we are being successfully, and they are spending their money on developing a navy, and so hopefully we're going to be on track.

Now that's giving you a bit of an introduction of where we are at the moment. I'm quite happy now to answer any questions you have.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you very much, sir. And David, you were first online, so why don't you get us started. David, you still with us?

Q Yeah, I'm -- sorry. I had to un-mute.

MR. HOLT: (Chuckles.) Okay.

Q Great.

Sir, thanks for taking the time to talk to us today. Really appreciate it. You know, I've paid a couple of visits to Umm Qasr and the Iraqi navy base there, and for about three years now, I've been hearing about this re-equipment plan and hearing that it was just about to happen. And in addition to hearing about these port ships and the offshore patrol boats or patrol vessels, you know, that's always been sort of on the horizon, but there seem to have been several abortive attempts to bring in new patrol boats; I mean, I actually saw a

couple of them down at Umm Qasr being worked on, some old refurbished patrol boats. So, I mean, in light of years of repeated failure to get some new equipment on board, how do we know this is going to happen this time?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: David, you make some very sound observations there, and very fair observations. I think failure is a bit of a harsh word to use. You understand the sort of challenges there are in the country, and the fact that we're trying to build the institutions to be able to build these -- the forces, and at the same time trying to fight a counterinsurgency campaign and train the forces on the ground. You are right, it's taken a long time to get some of these new ships contracted. And if you think about it, that's not surprising, in the fact that, you know, the Iraqis were really locked away from the world from about 1980 onwards, and one of the problems they have is difficulty of understanding the modern business world when it comes to contracting. So when they let a contract, they sort of let the contract, and once you eventually persuade them to do it, and then they're very nervous of the fact they're going to be double-crossed, and so they sort of, you know, hesitate.

The fact is that as of today, there are four patrol ships building in Iraq -- sorry, in Italy, I should say, four patrol ships building in Italy. The first one will be ready for the first crew to join it in April of next year, and then it goes through a training period in Italy before they come here, and then they'll be delivered at roughly three-month intervals. So April, it will be ready. You will see it in Iraq in roughly July of next year, and then every three months you'll see one of those turning up.

On top of that, there are two offshore support vessels under contract in Malaysia, and construction work starts on them in August. And the first three patrol boats are under construction in Malaysia, and construction work starts on them in August as well. So that should see the patrol boats delivery in September of next year.

So you're absolutely right, there has been lots of delay. There's been lots of talk. But the difference is now is that the contracts are let, and the money has moved, and construction work is actually happening.

Q How are those Predators holding up? I mean, even three years ago, the crews were complaining that the things were nearly useless?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: Yeah, again, another fair point, and there's lots of factors in those. And as you know, the Predators were, I believe, held up in U.N. sanctions for quite a few years, so when they turned up, they were sort of relatively old. Then when it came to getting spare parts for them, for instance, the diesels were German NTU diesels, and it took about 18 months just to go through the bureaucracy of releasing export licenses from Germany to allow spares to get through to Iraq. And then on top of that, you know, the time to source them.

And also one of the factors with the boats was that when you were starting that new navy, and you had to train the people and get everything going, they were naturally inexperienced in the use of those boats, in maintaining them, and the rest of it. But they've got quite an efficient system at the moment, and of the five of them, four of them are in the water available for operations and conducting operations at any one time, and one is always in planned maintenance out of the water. And although they have got some resource constraints at the moment, we're still finding it difficult to get all the spare parts we need because of, you know, various bureaucracy, they are

starting to turn up and the Iraqis are keeping them at 80 percent availability. And in fact, all the time I've been there, I think we've only dropped below that for about, I think it's three weeks since March, which is pretty good.

Q Great, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Andrew.

Q Sir, yes, good afternoon, Andrew Lubin, writing for the U.S. Naval Institute's Get the Gouge. I appreciate you taking the time with us.

Sir, you're going to have 47 vessels in the next two years. What is the Iraqi navy's mission going to be? And when you have everybody onstream and on station, how will it compare in strength to the Iranians who, I guess, are the biggest opponent in the area?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: Yeah, okay, I'd like to take your first question first -- you know, what is the task going to be. As part of -- when we were working on, you know, what do we need the new navy to be, this is very much an inclusive plan with the Iraqis. But we used the Center of Naval Analysis to conduct some analysis to assist us with what the challenges are going to be in the future and what the size of the force is likely to be. And that formed the basis of the plan.

So the first part of the plan, what's called 15-4-2, which is the 15 patrol boats, 4 patrol ships, and the 2 offshore support vessels, which are the major elements of the navy, are all about protecting the oil platforms and making sure they're secure from a non-state aggressor, sort of a terrorist aggressor, et cetera. And then with the smaller vessels they've got, the small riverine patrol crafts patrolling their waterway, the core Al Abdullah waterway, et cetera.

So by 2010 the Iraqi navy will -- sorry, by the end of 2010, early 2011, the Iraqi navy's aim is to be able to guard their oil infrastructure, their means of making money, from a counterinsurgency point of view.

They won't be able to defend themselves against a state aggressor probably until about 2018, you know, 2020, and that Coalition Overwatch, that sort of guarantee of security, will probably have to extend that, you know, to maybe those sort of time scales before they've built up other units there which can -- are able to take on a state aggressor.

Q Great. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: Okay, a couple of other folks joined us over the course. Who else is with us? Q Jarrod Fishman's on.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Jerrod.

Q Yes, sir, thank you for all your efforts.

You touched on the situation in Basra and the surrounding port, taking them back from the Mahdi army. Do you talk a little bit about the British navy or the allied navies, our ability to kind of control and ensure that there's federal control over those ports and it doesn't revert back to the militia or criminal syndicates?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: Yeah, yeah, sure, I'll give you the facts as they are. Firstly, the seizing of the ports was an entirely Iraqi operation. There was very little assistance from the coalition to start with, and they went in there and they basically took the ports and they got rid of everybody to start with, and then they gradually got the people back into work that were acceptable, and then dealt with other elements as required.

And the Iraqi marines are in control of the ports, and they also have security for the town of Umm Qasr as well. And they've got very good relationships with the tent folk of Umm Qasr. And in the same way as in Basra, the Iraqi army has done so well with coalition support, in order to make that a secure area, and Umm Qasr is now a secure area as well.

Now where the coalition is assisting the Iraqi navy and marines is, they took the port to start with, and there are sort of two elements where the coalition is assisting them -- well, three, I suppose. One main one is the training side, so there is a UK company which is providing a MTT, a military training team, with the 2nd Marine battalion on a day-to-day basis, and mentor them and assist them with their perimeter defense operation. And then the NTT, the naval training team in Umm Qasr, is doing basic level training, so they're bringing their standards up when they're not on operations, and working up a plan to build their overall capability.

And then the other part of the sort of coalition assistance, which is not a military line of operation, is to do with the rehabilitation of the port of Umm Qasr. This is very much a government of Iraq initiative, but we're assisting to facilitate that. For instance, there's a U.S. Coast Guard team that came over about six weeks now, and they just rendered their report, which explains how the port of Umm Qasr -- or what it needs to do to get ISPS accreditation. And I've forgotten what ISPS stands for, but it's basically the security accreditation to enable that port then to be a fully recognized secure maritime port.

MR. HOLT: Did someone else join us? Anybody else there?

Q Yes, my name is Scott. I'm with Flopping Aces.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Scott, go ahead.

Q How many personnel are you talking total for the Iraqi navy?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: Yeah, hi Scott. At the moment, we're 1,900 personnel. We expect that toward the end -- well, by February of next year, that'll have increased by another 750 personnel. So you're looking at sort of 2,600 odd. By the end of 2010, they'll be at around about 3,000 personnel.

Beyond that, they'll then move to somewhere between 4 (thousand) to 5,000 personnel, and that really depends on how much larger the marine force grows and exactly how successful they are or how, you know, the level of counterinsurgency campaign goes on will determine exactly whether they need to maintain a large counterinsurgency force and also build their state aggressor sort of force, or whether they can, you know, veer and hold between the two of them.

Q All right. Can I ask another one? MR. HOLT: Okay, sure. Go ahead.

CAPT. ABRAHAM: Yes, certainly.

Q Yeah, you were talking about how the objective is for the Iraqi navy to protect their waterways and their oil facilities. Between 2010 and 2018, who's going to protect their port against conventional threats instead of just asymmetric threats?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: We sort of covered this earlier on, but I'm happy to go over it again. The coalition will have a, you know, what is called strategic overwatch responsibility. And that is to ensure that while the -- you know, the Iraqis will be able to deal with a counterinsurgency force, you know, between 2009 and the end of 2010, depending on whether you're talking about the army, air force or navy. (Audio break) -- it will take the navy longer to achieve that, because it takes longer to build a ship, and that's really why it -- why it takes longer.

So we'll have achieved that by the end of 2010 or 2011, but it will take much longer before the Iraqi military are able to deal with a state aggressor. And the coalition will have that sort of -- act as a guarantor to prevent any form of state aggression.

Q Okay.

MR. HOLT: Okay. And Sir Will from Steel Jaw Scribe couldn't be with us. He sent me an email. And he did want to ask, besides the obvious rebuilding of the infrastructure, what do you see as the unique and particularly -- or particularly challenging aspects in rebuilding the Iraqi navy?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: That's a very good question. To be absolutely frank, I think one of the biggest challenges is just getting the Iraqi Ministry of Defense to realize how important it is to build their navy. And there are many reasons for that problem. And they have huge challenges at the moment which they have to overcome. They have been very, very successful since March in their various actions throughout Iraq, and they have done much to improve the security situation, and that is very much Iraqi led with the coalition supporting.

And so they are very much land focused, because that's where most of the fight has been; so that's where they've put their main efforts. And then naturally in Iraq it is a land-focused country. The coastline is very small. If you go and talk to a lot of Iraqis, I don't suppose they would necessarily know they've got a navy. So it's difficult sometimes to make headway in the Ministry of Defense and get them to realize the importance of building that navy. They're starting to understand that now. That is why they are -- you know, they have committed -- or they have contracts signed. That is why they are building ships. That is why they are giving a greater emphasis to their navy, and they're starting to build it. That is why, for instance, the prime minister actually asked the navy to see if the ports of Umm Qasr and Azerbaijan when he could have, you know, gone to the army. But he very much wanted the navy to do that, which is a measure of his confidence as well in that force.

So I suppose one of the challenges, as I say, is just getting the Iraqis to realize how important it is to build their navy.

MR. HOLT: Thank you, sir.

Any other follow up questions?

Q Yeah, I have one.

MR. HOLT: Okay, Andrew, go ahead.

Q Captain, Andrew Lubin again. Is there still an Iraqi coast guard, or is it being folded into the Iraqi navy?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: There is still an Iraqi coast guard, and I think, as with all sort of navies and coast guards all over the world, there's a bit of healthy rivalry between the two of them. But they have distinctly different roles.

The coast guard's role is to look after the internal waters of Iraq as opposed to the -- you know, the territorial seas and territorial waters of Iraq. The coast guard does, its major role is to look after the Shatt-al-Arab waterway, and as you all well know, that is the border with Iran at the moment, and it is a -- it is a huge challenge for them. And there you have a similar problem in that the navy is that -- they're sort of under-resourced and underfunded. But there's a new initiative going on with them now to help them bring them up to strength, to give them the equipment they need, and to get them retrained. And that's already starting to show -- reap its benefits as they did a combined operation only two weeks ago with the Iraqi army in Basra, very successfully, on the Shatt al-Arab, and seized some undesirable people and weapons.

But they are going to remain a separate force, and that's the decision, because they have, you know, unique roles to do. And it's not thought -- the prime minister doesn't think they should be combined, but it has come up in conversation in the last few months.

Q Great, thank you.

MR. HOLT: Okay. Anyone else?

Q Can I go again.

MR. HOLT: Sure, go ahead. Q Okay. Andrew Lubin again. Captain, can you talk about the training the Royal Marines and the American Marines are giving to their counterparts? And who's actually running it, you guys or us?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: (Chuckles.) The -- right. The -- I suppose we pool the Iraqis' marines, and that's because they're -- you know, they're associated with the -- you know, with the maritime environment. But even they wouldn't, you know, equate themselves with a U.S. Marine or a Royal Marine as you and I know them. They're very much, you know, just starting out. They have very specific roles at the moment. And the two battalions -- the first battalion has the role to do the boarding of ships and the defense of the oil platforms; and the second battalion has a role to do, the perimeter defense of the port.

And because of the nature of training them and the time we've had to do it, they're very focused on those particular roles. They're not at full strength yet; we need to get them up -- they're about 60 percent of their strength, so they've got challenges there as well. But as I say we're recruiting additional personnel towards the end of this year and we will bring them up to strength.

But once we've got them up to strength, and they're at a -- the standard, consistent standard as it were for both jobs, we're then going to train them so that they can do either one of the roles as it were, so that we create a proper versatile marine. And once we've got to that stage, that's the stage then we can start building on their capability and start moving towards, you know, the sort of marine-type standards that you and I would expect. On the role of training them -- and it is a challenge, because one of the things we shouldn't forget is that in the West, largely, we have the advantage of training our people, you know, in safety, in isolation, when they're not fighting a war. These guys are fighting a war, and they're doing operations, and we're trying to train them at the same time. And I literally mean that. They'll come off a week's worth of boarding or a week's worth of defending the oil platforms, and then they'll go into do some sort of training. That is -- that is pretty tough.

So those are some of the challenges with the marines. And we need to get more marines to get headroom to really take their standards forward. So we've got some challenges there, but we've got a plan, and we know what we need to do, and they are very keen to do it as well, and that's a key thing.

You asked about who's training them. It's a combined Royal Marine and U.S. Marine corps, very, very small team at the moment. There are sort of four principal instructors, and there is a section assisting with that sort of training. But because we have been given this new challenge in April, there is an additional major and three more senior NCOs which will turn up shortly to provide additional support.

Now that might not seem much, but that's just the core of the team, and then we're going to take platoons and companies eventually up to the SHAVR (ph), divisional training center, and use the better facilities there to be able to enhance their professional standards. A bit of a long-winded explanation, but it is quite a complicated problem. But, you know, we've got a pretty good plan to get them to where they need to be, and they're very keen to get there, which is the important thing.

Q Good. So it would be fair to say then that the first battalion does the, for lack of a better phrase, sea service missions, seize and -- you know, securing oil wells and that type of thing?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: Yeah, you're absolutely right. The first battalion is very much -- at the moment that is a tug-to-sea service, and the second battalion is a light infantry battalion. And we're just concentrating on those tasks, so that we can get those tasks well because they have, you know, important things to do, real things to do, and we don't want to confuse the issue by trying to run before we can walk. We want to be able to walk strongly, and then we can think about doing a little bit of sprinting once we've got that done.

Q Excellent. Thank you very much.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. One question here, again from Steel Jaw Scribe: How would you judge the quality of the average Iraqi sailor or marine today?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: Again, that's a -- you know, what are we judging it against. All I can tell -- I'll give you -- this is the best way I can sum that up. I was down -- I'd only been in Umm Qasr about four or five days when -- sorry, in Iraq four or five days, when the -- (inaudible) -- operations kicked

off. And I was -- went down with the admiral to Basra to witness what was going on and to hear to go and see the prime minister and the minister of defense and the general -- (inaudible) -- as they were coordinating the operation.

And I went down to Umm Qasr, and they were given the job of taking the ports. And at the time they hadn't received these 500 additional soldiers, so the evening I was down there I saw 180 sailors who were trained, who were given weapons, given orders, and told to get on and do the job that they had to do. They had only come out of training maybe a few months before, but they got on, they did the job and they did it well.

Now I look back at my country, and probably the same for the U.S., if we took soldiers maybe six weeks out of training and then told them, right, go and seize those ports over there, I don't think we would do it any better than the Iraqis did, and they did a pretty solid job.

So they're committed, they're very keen to be trained, they're hungry for the knowledge we can pass onto them, and it's just a case of getting enough of them there, getting the equipment they need to do the job, and staying with them at a pace that they can learn.

Hopefully that answers your question.

MR. HOLT: That does, sir, and it also kind of alludes to the quality of their leadership as well. Is that also a driving factor in their success?

CAPT. ABRAHAM: Yeah. We have -- there is a -- the problem with leaders in Iraq at the moment, and this is true whenever you're trying to build a military force very quickly, is that, you know, it takes time to build a leader. In our military, it probably takes, you know, six or seven years to get a junior officer up to a stage where he is really comfortable at doing his job, and that's without having to -- you know, having to fight a war at the same time. And therefore that's true for the NCOs and everything else. So they have a shortage of leaders, but the leaders they've got are committed, and they're again open to learn new things, and in particular their admiral, the head of Iraqi navy, Admiral Mohammed Jawad, is very open to ideas. He's very forward leaning. He wants his navy to be good. He's very, very proud of them. And I think everybody in Iraqi navy knows what he expects, and they work very hard to achieve that standard.

MR. HOLT: All right. Thank you very much, sir, and we appreciate you joining us. We're out of time here, but we appreciate you joining us today for the DOD Live Bloggers Roundtable.

With us today, Captain Abraham -- or Captain Paul Abraham, who is the director of maritime strategic transition team and senior adviser to the Iraqi navy.

Thank you very much for joining us, sir.

CAPT. ABRAHAM: It's a pleasure. Thank you very much.

Q Captain, thank you for the time.

Q Thanks, Captain.

CAPT. ABRAHAM: Thank you.

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